




An Exercise in Values Identification

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t's 9:15 on a Saturday night. You are comfortably seated in front of your television set watching your favorite show. Without warning, the image reduces to a brilliant white line in the middle of the screen. The line quickly collapses to a shining blip, then disappears entirely.

The audio is unaffected, so for a moment or two you sit and listen as the characters continue their dialogue. Perhaps there is a problem with the cable company. Maybe the image will return. It doesn't. Gradually you

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realize the picture isn't coming back. Your television is broken. Are you going to repair it, or is it time to get a new TV?

If you decide to get a new set, how would you go about doing it? Would you ask friends and family for recommendations? For loaners? For donations? Would you sit down and make a rigorous list of everything you want the new device to do, or would you just run out to the store and buy one? Would your new set be just like the old one, or would it be bigger?

Imagine both your actions and the outcome. How much money would you spend, if any? How long would it take to achieve the outcome (i.e., the new or repaired TV)? How would your television-watching experience change? Would the reds be redder and the blues bluer? Would the comedies be funnier and the dramas more dramatic? Or would things be pretty much like they were before?

There is a point to all these questions. It turns out, the decisions you make in this scenario can provide insight into your values and priorities, which in turn, can be applied to acquisitions and program management.

Once we understand our values, we can understand why we make the decisions we do.

Some people's top priority is to replace the capability without delay. For them, it would be vitally important to get a new TV right away. Others may figure they don't need a new TV right away and are content to take their time in order to satisfy some other value. Some people want to make sure they spend as little money as possible, while others get excited at the prospect of spending a couple of thousand dollars. For some, the new set must be a big, shiny piece of high-definition wonder-tech. Others are content with more modest capabilities. Before we examine what these decisions say about our priorities and values (and why that matters), let me tell you what I did when I was in this situation.

The Day My TV Died

The television set that died was a 10-year-old, 27-inch cathode ray tube (CRT) set. Its picture quality had been slowly degrading for a while, so when the tube finally blew, it wasn't exactly a surprise. Right away this should tell you that having the latest and greatest technology is not a top priority in my house.

When the image disappeared, my wife and I immediately went online and start looking for information about televi-

sions. A lot had changed in the 10 years since we last bought a set. We quickly learned the difference between LED, LCD, and plasma screens; and became versed in things like 720p and 1080p. I posted a plea for advice on my Facebook page, and we quickly got recommendations from several video-phile friends. This shows, among other things, that we value being an informed consumer.

Next, we checked the websites for all the big electronics stores near us and found ourselves leaning towards a set that was much larger and more expensive than we'd originally envisioned. As sticker shock set in, we also discovered our current TV cabinet was not large enough to hold any of the sets we were considering. Replacing not only the TV set but also the furniture was going to be even more expensive and time-consuming than we'd thought. Plus, we'd have to figure out what to do with the current cabinet. Unfortunately, we'd just dropped a lot of money on some unexpected car repairs, so this was not good news. Despite my recent promotion, it was important to us to not spend too much money—yet another clue about our priorities.

Early the next morning, a new thought hit me: Craigslist! I'd never bought anything using it before, but I thought I'd check it out. To make a long story short, we ended up replacing our 27-inch set with a 35-inch CRT set for \$50 from a person who lived just a few miles away. By 4 p.m., it was plugged in and working just fine.

The new set is 8 inches larger and considerably nicer than our previous one. The picture is brighter, the audio clearer, and overall, it provides a better television-watching experience. It fits our existing cabinet with barely an inch to spare—anything larger would have required new furniture. In the end, it is exactly what we wanted, and we got it in less than a day for a mere fifty bucks. All in all, my family is very satisfied with the outcome.

Examining Our Values

I told you this story in order to illustrate the role values and priorities play in decision making. In this situation, my wife and I agreed it was important to quickly secure an inexpensive set. Ordering one online would have saved some money compared to local retailers, but would have also taken too long, so we initially limited our research to local stores. When we discovered the large price and sizes available locally, we started looking for alternatives. These decisions were direct expressions of our values.

We did not place a high value on having a top-of-the-line set. We just wanted something a little better than what we had before. Given the state of our previous TV, just about anything would have been a step up, so a small improvement shouldn't have been difficult to achieve; however, given the advances in television technology over the last decade, we found ourselves considering sets that were a lot better—more than we really needed, to be honest. So

when the nice guy in the online Consumer Reports video said we shouldn't buy anything less than a 50-inch set, it hit me that he was expressing one of his values (it's important to have a big TV), not one of mine. The 35-inch set we ended up with was perfect for us.

Now, the outcome that we found so satisfying would be entirely undesirable to people who value different things. Some readers might look at this story as a missed opportunity to get the latest technology. For people who value high-tech systems, an old set can never be as good as a new one, and a CRT is clearly inferior to a flat panel. On the other end of the spectrum, those who value thrift even more than I do might be skeptical of any outcome achieved so quickly. No doubt there was a \$35 set posted for sale on Craigslist the next day. We might have found it if we'd been patient enough to keep looking.

Examine Your Values

I hope this story does two things. First, I hope it encourages us to think about the way values shape decision making. Second, I hope it helps bring some hidden values to light. Once we understand our values, we can understand why we make the decisions we do. This is particularly important in group decision-making situations, such as defense acquisition projects.

One trick to identifying hidden values is to listen to what people brag about. In this story, I bragged about only spending \$50 on a "new" TV. I view the set's low cost as a positive attribute, so I mention it in positive terms. In contrast, people who do not value thrift might be reluctant to admit owning such a cheap TV. They might even find it embarrassing. Such people are more likely to brag about spending \$5,000 on a new set than to admit they only spent \$50.

Similarly, because I value speed, I expressed pride over how quickly I found and bought this set. Other people might reasonably take pride in how much time they spend doing thorough, in-depth research before committing to a purchase. I hope it is obvious that the way we think about cost, time and complexity will drive different decisions, which lead to different outcomes.

Fortunately, my wife and I were working from a common set of values and priorities. Imagine the friction if one of us thought it was important to spend as little money as possible, while the other one found satisfaction in spending a lot. Or imagine if one of us wanted to decide quickly while the other wanted to take plenty of time. Even worse, imagine if we thought we had the same values but actually disagreed on what attributes were most important and desirable. Entire sitcom seasons have been based on little more than that premise, but when this sort of disagreement is present in an acquisition program, it's a lot less funny. Regardless of the context, if the different parties

have different values there is sure to be friction and frustration, particularly if we've never discussed the differences in the first place.

Now, the values you use to buy a television for yourself may be different from the values you use at work. That's fine. Furthermore, the values you express on one project may be different from the values you express on a different project. That's also fine. Values are neither monolithic nor static, and any given person may use different value sets in different contexts. That is entirely appropriate because different situations present different requirements. Sometimes it really is important to act quickly. In other situations, it is wise and necessary to take our time. If I just won the lottery, even I would be unlikely to value inexpensive solutions as much as I do today. In fact, if I suddenly became a millionaire, I just might buy a \$5,000 TV after all. The key is to be aware of what our values are, understand how they influence our decisions, and, as much as possible, be deliberate in selecting them.

I suggest we all take a hard look at whether adding more time and money to a program really helps improve the outcome.

A quick side note for those who might object that there is no Craigslist equivalent for the DoD: Check out the article "Sharpening the Spear Through Innovative Acquisition," by Jay Bolles, et al. (*Defense AT&L*, May-June 2009). The article discusses how the Navy and Marine Corps Adversary Program bought inexpensive used F-5s from the Swiss Air Force to replace aging American F-5s. No, we can't do that for every need, but we can probably do something similar more often than we do.

It's FIST Time!

OK, back to the main point. Regular readers know I'm a big fan of a value set called FIST (Fast, Inexpensive, Simple, Tiny). The FIST value set basically says it is important and good to be fast, inexpensive, simple, and tiny; clearly my television-buying experience was driven by the FIST values. I am happy with my new TV because it didn't take much time or money to buy it, it didn't require any new adaptors or new furniture, and it was even small enough to fit in my existing cabinet. If I'd used another group of values, I would either be dissatisfied with the \$50 TV or would be the proud owner of something else.

The same thing can happen in an acquisition program. Our values can lead us to define success as rapidly delivering an affordable, simple system. Or our values can lead us to define success as taking our time, spending a lot of money, and delivering a highly complex, cutting-edge system. These two objectives will lead to very different behaviors and very different outcomes. Keep in mind that values have an impact across the spectrum of decision making, from requirements and technical architectures to organizational structures and processes.

While I'm not sure we can optimize our values once and for all, I contend that some value sets are more productive and appropriate for a given situation than others. As a general rule of thumb, I think FIST is a good starting place. I suggest we all take a hard look at whether adding more time and money to a program really helps improve the outcome. Furthermore, we would do well to examine the desirability of complexity in our organizations, processes, and systems; and make thoughtful assessments of complexity's costs and contributions. We also need to be aware of the difference between elegant simplicity and stupid simplisticness.

As a project begins, we should make up our minds whether it is truly good and important to be big, expensive, complex, and slow or whether, perhaps, it is more desirable to be fast, inexpensive, simple, and tiny. Deliberately assessing our values and making intentional choices is the first step

toward establishing a reliable set of values for our subsequent decisions.

So let's return to the television question. If your TV died, what would you do? Your decision reveals important clues about your values. If you were to pose the question to the people who share your television, do you see any potential values conflicts? How many of us would end up feeling bad about the money we spent on the set (either too much or too little)? How many of us would regret spending too much time or not enough time researching our options? Whether you spend \$50 and four hours or \$5,000 and four weeks, if your decisions are consistent with your values, you're much more likely to be satisfied with the outcome. If your outcome leaves you feeling doubtful, queasy, or slightly embarrassed, that might be a sign your actions were contrary to your values in some way.

This little thought experiment about a television isn't really about a television. It's actually an opportunity to reflect on values—what they are and why they matter. Having identified and examined our values in one situation, we can then apply the practice to other situations, like weapons system acquisition projects. In doing so, we just might discover decision paths that lead to better outcomes and avoid some unnecessary friction.

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